

Hooked on war: Psalm 23; John 10:11-18

by [Andrew Warner](#) in the [May 3, 2003](#) issue

The navy shaped my grandfather's life. He was a retired navy officer when he died, so we held his funeral at Arlington National Cemetery. We were greeted at the gates of Fort Myer by armed guards. As my family and I drove through the base, we noted the display of guns and armaments. Outside the chapel stood an honor guard.

After the family service, Taps played while my grandfather's ashes were put into a horse-drawn casket and we were escorted through the cemetery—the soldiers, the horse-drawn carriage, then the family. At the burial site an American flag was folded and presented to my grandmother, and the noise of a 21-gun salute made us jump.

The overwhelming power of our military and our government was on display—not just the power to defeat an enemy, but the symbolic reminder of our military's power. Even in a military funeral, we see how the military gives meaning even to death, shape even to destruction, and an idealistic aura to aggression.

For many years my congregation has struggled with its place and calling in a superpower nation. During the height of the cold-war confrontation with the Soviet Union, for example, we designated ourselves a “Just Peace” congregation. We were rejecting the military arms race and the logic of mutual assured destruction without declaring ourselves pacifists.

Now, in a different political environment, we are again grappling with the morality of American military power. Increasingly we are finding it necessary to understand how our faith affects our relationship to America, how our love of Jesus informs and even changes our love of America, and how God calls us to speak up for the powerless. Advocating for peace is requiring us to confront the seductive power of military might at a time when its allure becomes almost unbearable; dissent is seen as treason, discussion as a betrayal.

Now, in “real time” news, journalists encourage us to be embedded with the war effort. The sight of men and women from our own towns and congregations can make us instinctively support a war. The war itself is often presented with a certain glamour—“smart” bombs, quick tanks, special ops—while the media help us protect

ourselves from gory reality. Chris Hedges, a former war correspondent and author of *War Is a Force Which Unites Us*, describes the seductive quality of martial power as a narcotic that can provoke in whole societies a self-righteous delirium.

Making sense of our mission and ministry in this time requires that we find some way to keep our heads clear of the narcotic of war. We must cultivate an alternative power, an alternative source of meaning. Good Shepherd Sunday may be the time to recall that we derive our identity not from the prestige of our country but from the presence of our Lord.

The gospel leads us to remember to whom we belong. “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.” In moments of national crises, amidst the rally cry of war, we are to know that we belong to Jesus. The seductive voice of military might drowns out the call of Jesus; in countless conflicts this has occurred, and the church has become a source of sanctimonious propaganda.

Therefore, reciting the 23rd Psalm is both a reminder and a confession. It reminds us that Jesus is our only shepherd, the one whose voice we must heed, and that we must confess that often we listen to the call of wolves and lazy hirelings. By reciting the 23rd Psalm we ascribe to Jesus prerogatives that the state normally takes on for itself. It is not the state but the shepherd Jesus who is to provide for our health; the shepherd Jesus who ensures our security; the shepherd Jesus who protects us and provides for us.

It is to Jesus the shepherd that our ancestors in faith looked when they experienced anxiety, turmoil and oppression. The Heidelberg Catechism, my denomination’s FAQ on Christian life, captures this in its opening question:

“What is your only comfort, in life and in death?”

“That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.”

In my congregation we furnish the sanctuary with a window of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, but we do not have an American flag there, because we seek our comfort in the Lord’s presence and not in the Pentagon’s power.

To be led by our shepherd Jesus does not mean we are naïve about the reality of wolves and thickets and lazy hirelings who might endanger the sheep. It doesn’t

mean we ignore the oppression of Kurdish and Shi'ite Iraqis. It doesn't mean we overlook the threat to international peace posed by a nuclear North Korea. It doesn't mean we ignore the immorality of preemptive wars. Instead, amid all the uncertainty of this life, amid all of the real and imagined dangers, our peace comes from the presence of our shepherd Jesus who "prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

It is by remembering that Jesus is my Good Shepherd that we can find the presence of mind to speak and witness and preach in a nation overtaken by the rhetoric and the narcotic of war.